

Time and Again

by Nancy K. Jentsch

I

The broom handle just reached the latch and a flick to the left released the transom window. As it swung open, a wisp of fresh air lingered for a time in the entryway: the first fresh air of the spring to enter the thick walls of the stone farmhouse. She stood there for a time, the scent of the air evoking a memory long forgotten. She had been a little girl at the time and was being cared for by her Oma, her mother's mother, because there was a new baby in the family who required her mother's attention. Oma had opened the door of her farmhouse on a windy spring day like this one and let in a burst of fresh air. Strange, Elisabeth thought, strange that here in America so much was different, and yet the spring air was just as she recalled it from that early memory back in Hausbach. Elisabeth sighed and looked up at the transom. She took her broom and swatted at a cobweb in the corner that had formed there since the last time she had cleaned.

Opening the door to shake out her broom, she glanced at the cow they relied on for milk. Elisabeth had let her out into the pasture today for the first time since fall. She would have to bring her in soon to prevent her from eating too much fresh grass on her first day out this spring. That could make her sick after a winter of chomping her way through crisp hay. Elisabeth shook her broom, and leaning on it, looked out again at the contented cow. They'd grown up together and now it was Elisabeth's job to care for the cow. She fed her, carried her water and milked her twice a day. It wouldn't be long before she would have no more milk to give and need to be bred again. Then the family would get milk from Elisabeth's older brother Peter's cow. That was how it was—the families helped each other out when supplies ran short.

The crisp air chilled her face. She tilted her chin toward the sun, as if to beg it to warm her. The days were all so much the same to her. The morning chores always took Elisabeth almost till noon. Of course her mother said that was only because she worked slowly. Yes, she knew that she moved at a slow pace these days, but there was a reason for that. She had so many thoughts in her head, and working them out took time. For example, the first fresh air in the house today had taken her thoughts to the place that had been home to her family for generations. That led her to remember that there had been such excitement as they were getting ready to leave; there had been many hopes and dreams for the move her father wanted so much to make. But had her mother been so eager for the move? She couldn't remember. Papa's best friend had left Hausbach two years earlier and had settled in a river valley in Kentucky where

land was plentiful and markets promising. The little communication the men had had contained enough encouragement for her father, Michael, to sell his few possessions for a few pieces of gold and leave Hausbach with two other families. Where was the excitement now? Elisabeth did her chores every day, but they got her nowhere. Her mother, Anna, wouldn't hear of her complaints. "Ach, you're spoiled," she'd say, "of course we're better off here than we were in Hausbach." Elisabeth knew her mother believed it, though she couldn't imagine more drudgery than she had with her chores here in Kentucky. And she knew something else: her mother certainly missed her home and her family — maybe even more than she would be willing to admit. Elisabeth had seen just how pleased her mother had been when the Kremers, who had crossed the Atlantic with her family in 1843, had finally joined them in Kentucky after a long stay in New Orleans. Her mother was happy about every family that joined their community from Hausbach and talked about how good it was for them all to put down roots and stay on the land they had settled. Those who were able built solid stone houses meant to last for a century or more. "Our families lived in Hausbach for generations," she always said. "Why should it be any different here?"

Three years ago the signs of spring had been greeted exuberantly by Elisabeth. At the end of the school year, she knew she'd be finished with the sixth grade. She wouldn't return to the schoolhouse in the fall. Her parents were satisfied that she had learned what a girl needed to know. And now, three years later she was still at home, caring for the cow and batting at cobwebs. Today she asked herself for what had to be the thousandth time if there would ever be anything more to her life? Last fall had brought a hint of excitement when she had gone to stay with her brother Peter and his wife after their first child was born. She'd been curious about the little pink bundle she got to hold from time to time. How helpless he seemed, though his cries certainly did their job: summoning his Mama! And how sad they'd all been when he sickened and the doctor was called upon. He had known the baby wouldn't live and Elisabeth had had to translate his words for her mother. The baby's grave was the first in the family plot and the thought of standing by the tiny mound of earth on the raw day he was buried there still left her short of breath. Peter's wife hadn't gotten over the emptiness in her heart yet, and Elisabeth wondered if she ever would. And Peter had mourned in his own way. He took on back-breaking work and exhausted himself every chance he got. It was as if he felt he had to punish himself for his son's death and his wife's grief, fighting all the odds that he'd leave the world something of value that hadn't been there before. The baby boy's death had meant the end to the only new opportunity that had come to her life since she'd left school.

"The weeds need trimming along the path to the outhouse." Anna at age fifteen would rather have been reading a book or writing stories. As she knelt at the flat rocks that had been laid on this path from the kitchen to the outhouse she thought about the people who had trod on the stones all the years they had been there. The strong backs and hands of her ancestors and their neighbors had brought them here and laid them out nice and straight. I guess it was something to be thankful for, not having to worry about muddy feet every time you used the john, she mused.

"And when you finish with the weeds, don't forget to bring the sheep in," she heard her mother call. How could she forget? She did it every day.

II

It can't get much hotter than this, Elisabeth thought as she sat next to her brother Matthias. The air was heavy and not a leaf stirred as they passed. He'd harnessed the

old draft horse Leo to the cart to go to town and buy supplies. There were eggs and cheese in a basket to help pay for things. *There'll be even more extra milk soon when Margaret leaves us to marry this fall. Maybe that will mean there will even be a little more money for finer cloth for clothing and . . .* It took them over half an hour to follow the rutted roadway the three hilly miles into the town of Alexandria. Mama knew she was doing Elisabeth a favor by asking her to do the shopping. That let the young girl get away from the house and into town. Elisabeth used the time to let her thoughts wander. Matthias wasn't much of a one for conversation and kept his eyes fixed on the windy narrow road. It hadn't rained for a couple of weeks, so the ruts weren't muddy, but they could be dangerous for a horse like Leo. He was getting old, but was still reliable enough to serve the family. Elisabeth had never liked Leo. He was plain looking and just as dull in temperament.

Elisabeth's thoughts settled on her brother Peter and his wife. There still was no second child on the way and Liese had looked as haggard and forlorn as ever when Elisabeth had visited last. The family had gathered at her brother's house after Mass last Sunday. They had celebrated the anniversary of their arrival in New Orleans: July 16, 1843, just like they remembered many anniversaries or *Jahrestage* throughout the year.

But Elisabeth preferred to recall earlier days when her brother Peter was courting Liese. How cheerful everyone in the family had felt—it was as if Peter's mood was contagious. How did it feel to be in love? To marry and leave one's parents? Was that flutter Elisabeth had felt upon seeing her old school mate Alois Ritter at the end-of-school ceremony anything like love? It had taken her weeks to get her mind off how he had looked at her and smiled in her direction that day. Since then she'd only seen him at church, and she'd done her best to stay away from him, fearing her blush would give away her feelings. In school she'd found him a little funny. He spoke German like she did, but had an accent that made him hard to understand. His family had come to Four Mile some years after Elisabeth's. They were from Liechtenstein and spoke German, though it sometimes hardly sounded like it. Their language was more like that of some of the other settlers of Four Mile who were from Switzerland. She thought it was easier to speak English with him. There were fewer misunderstandings.

They bought the few supplies they needed and headed back the rutted road to Four Mile, where they, a number of their family's friends and other German-speaking people had settled. They could get most of what they wanted in their own community, but there were a few supplies that only the general store in Alexandria could supply. One of the Kremer boys had been talking about opening up a store in Four Mile. He was a shoemaker by trade like his father, and he fancied he could keep up a store alongside his shop. Mama thought it was a fine idea. It might keep people in Four Mile. Without a store she knew some people would want to move closer in to a town. Elisabeth knew that for her, a store in Four Mile would only mean more walking and fewer cart rides.

The radio played in the car as the three of them drove the four miles to the Alexandria Park. The roads in this part of the county were too hilly and curvy to be safe to ride bikes on, so the family made trips to the park just so Anna and her brother Peter could ride their bikes. Peter tried out some stunts while Anna rounded the curves slowly, giving her thoughts time to wander. The summers can get boring. I'm even looking forward to school. I have my friends there. I wonder what it'll be like to see them again. I wonder if they'll have changed? I wonder if they'll think I have. On the way home from the park she asked, "Mama, which do you think is better: being a child or being an adult?"

III

They were headed uphill with brightly colored leaves on the trees and on the ground under their feet. It had rained the night before and that had forced a carpet of newly fallen leaves to form on the path the family took to and from the church. The air felt and smelled as if it had been washed clean. At the crest of the hill, the red brick building came into view. Peter often told of their early days in America when there had been no church here. Priests came out from the city to say an occasional Mass. But when the Steffens donated land for the church and the community pitched in to build the wooden church, the priests came more regularly. Now they had their own priest, a brick church and there was talk of a convent.

Elisabeth was certain she'd see Alois today and had made sure her dress looked as nice as it could. If only Mama would let her have material for a new one. She'd had this one long enough and had let it out as much as she possibly could. Alois had talked to her after Mass the last few weeks. She'd chatted about it with Anna Kremer when they'd had a few minutes alone, and they were both surprised he hadn't yet come to call on her at home. Elisabeth liked the idea of Alois coming by and paying her some attention. If they spoke English, it would be hard for her parents to understand what they were saying. And it would be a sign that they were really Americans now. Her thoughts of him were connected with something bigger, too. She imagined that she and Alois could leave this place for somewhere that would be better than where they were. That thought excited her. She tried to recall a bit of the anticipation that had been all around her so many years ago, before leaving Hausbach, but she couldn't be sure if what she remembered had been only happiness or if there had been anxiety mixed in. Her parents told stories about their old home but she never remembered hearing them talk about what their emotions had been when they left. Her father had certainly wanted to leave. But her mother? The way she talked about how important it was to stay here and put down roots made Elisabeth wonder if she hadn't been opposed to the move, if she'd wanted to stay in Hausbach. *I must be more like my father. I don't see anything wrong with wanting to leave a place if somewhere else will be better.*

After Mass, the unmarried men stood at the church entrance, kicking stones and saying a few words to each other. The girls and young women stood a little apart, glancing at the men from time to time, but happy to have time to visit with each other. Elisabeth enjoyed telling stories to the other girls. Sometimes she told ones that she'd heard from her parents about their life in Hausbach. She had been so young when they left that the stories seemed exotic and almost magical. Could stories about her life here on Four Mile Creek ever sound exotic to anyone? Maybe if she was lucky enough to move away they would someday.

It turned out that this was not a lucky day. Mama hurried her away from the group of girls before Alois had a chance to stop by and talk to her. Elisabeth was too polite to lose her temper with her mother, but she hardly spoke a word to her or the rest of the family on their way back over the hill. At home the family packed a crock of this year's sauerkraut and some bottles of cider into their cart, hitched up Leo and made for Peter and Liese's house. The mud on the road made for rough going and the boys had to get out and push the wheels out of ruts again and again. First the trip and then the dinner and visit seemed to last an eternity. Elisabeth just wanted to be at home. Maybe, just maybe, Alois would come by today. And in keeping with her unlucky day, she'd not be there—she'd be sulking at her brother's house.

"Was ist los?" asked her brother when they ended up alone behind the house after the meal.

“Oh, nothing,” she answered. “I just feel like being quiet.” Peter left her alone after that. He seemed to understand.

Anna had finished her homework and practiced the piano. For a while she'd hung around the phone downstairs, but when it didn't ring, she went into her room and closed the door. On this day, like on many others, she felt like being alone with her thoughts. She wondered if the thick stone walls of this old house had ever heard laments like hers. Had anyone before her ever been so confused? She wished she could hear sounds and voices from the past. Maybe they'd have some answers. What's more, there were surely lots of stories these walls could tell—stories she'd love to write.

After she'd had some time to think, she pulled out her diary. Often her days would seem colorless until she wrote about them. Then the people and events came to life for her and she even felt she could understand herself better. Her diary entries became stories with fact and fiction mixed together. In the boundaries of her room her thoughts could blossom and fill every square inch. She loved her home and the hills that surrounded it. But there were times when she thought about what might be beyond those hills waiting for her. Could she ever be brave enough to leave this place? Could she ever stand to stay here all her life? The conflicts made her wonder if she had the genes of stay putters and adventurers all mixed up together in her teenage self.

IV

Yesterday the first snow had come and with it another visit from Henry Kremer. When he summoned his courage to speak, all he could talk about was the store he wanted to open next to the outbuilding where he and his father made and repaired shoes. He was a quiet boy, always shuffling his feet, his hat in his hands, before he was asked to sit. But talking about the store seemed to bring out another person in him. He and Elisabeth had sat in the dining room by the stove and her mother had made them some hot cider. Elisabeth used the time to do some mending; she simply didn't have much to say to Henry. He seemed so keen on talking to her about staying in Four Mile, but her mind was miles away.

Today was Saturday. Tomorrow she would see Alois at church. Would he stay away from her because word had gotten around that Henry was courting her? That didn't sound like Alois. In many ways, he was as different from Henry as he could be. He was a real leader among the boys. Sometimes he was loud, but always he seemed sure of himself.

Elisabeth surely preferred Alois to Henry, but then there was her mother. Henry was from a Hausbach family and he had made it known that he planned to stay in Four Mile. In her mother's eyes he shone like a star come to earth, a shooting star whose tail would take root along Four Mile Creek. And then there was her friend Anna Kremer. She and Henry were cousins and she thought it would be great to have Elisabeth as part of her family. Could Elisabeth let her friend down? Would she have the choice?

The church had been cold, so Elisabeth hadn't shed any of the layers she'd worn to cross the hilltop to church. She just pulled her coat tighter around herself as she headed outdoors to stand with the other girls. Pulling her scarf up over her mouth, she decided against telling a story that had just occurred to her. It was so cold it seemed the words might turn to ice as she formed them. She turned to see what Anna and the others were looking at. The boys were standing close by and Henry was shuffling his feet. Alois was smiling and then he said, “In the spring I'm leaving. I've decided to

go west. I have an uncle who lives on the prairie. It's so flat, you can see miles before your view stops." "Sounds boring, if you ask me," commented one of the boys. "Oh, no," Alois went on, "there's so much to do, clearing land for crops, I can't imagine being bored there. And if I did get bored, I could always move even farther west. There's plenty of land between the prairie and where the sun sets."

The boys' voices grew quieter and soon the group broke up. Alois walked boldly over to the girls and stopped right in front of Elisabeth. He tipped his hat and made an awkward little bow in her direction. "Do you ever dream of the prairie?" he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he turned and walked toward his family, which was gathering to leave.

Elisabeth was too stunned to speak. She felt her cheeks grow warm despite the winter temperature and the other girls' gazes avoided hers as they giggled into their scarves.

It had been almost a week since Alois had asked his question in the church yard. It was Friday, the day that Henry usually came to see her. He had surely heard what Alois had asked her on Sunday. Would he dare to come and see her again? Would Alois become her suitor now?

It had always been her wish for Alois to court her. She had dreamt of moving on with him and away from her life in Four Mile. But now that it seemed that might happen, she wasn't so sure any more. The prairie didn't sound too exciting to her. It sounded like so much work, and no hills to feel secure under. Besides his uncle, there would be no family there, no mutual support like there was in Four Mile. But then again, she would be with Alois and his presence did give her body a flutter that no one else's did.

If her lot was cast with Henry, she'd have her family, her familiar home and hills and the sense that she knew what would be in her future: more of the same. But there was something to be said for the familiar. And she'd begun to get used to Henry's quiet ways.

It didn't make any sense to her. Now that what she had yearned for was so close, she was beginning to have doubts. What should she do? She wasn't used to having choices in her life. She'd never had to make many decisions, and certainly no serious ones. *How does one decide?* It seemed wrong to make a choice based on luck, like drawing straws. So what if she let him decide? What if she just waited, and the first of the two who showed up at her door would be the one she chose. That way she couldn't regret a bad decision later.

She got up and walked down the stairs to the dining room. It was dark enough to light a lamp. Her mending stayed in the basket at her feet as she sat by the stove.

It was not long till she heard steps on the porch. She closed her eyes and heard feet shuffling. Then she heard a very firm knock on the door.

Anna woke with a start. It was a dark and windy winter morning. Perhaps the wind had disturbed her sleep. She rolled over and closed her eyes again and remembered the dream she had been having. It was a dream about olden days—it must have been more than a hundred years ago—but she had been there. There had been a knock on a door that had sounded through the wall. That was what had woken her.

When she got out of bed, she reached for her journal. There was a story in that dream. A story she had been yearning for. A story of where she had come from.